



Kitchen *Artistry*

Story by Beth Reece Photos by Paul Disney

SOLDIER-CHEFS are two parts cook, one part artist. Consider PFC Nick Haupt as he fans sautéed snow peas around a mound of linguini. Even hurried eaters become connoisseurs as they eye Haupt's artistry with ordinary ingredients.

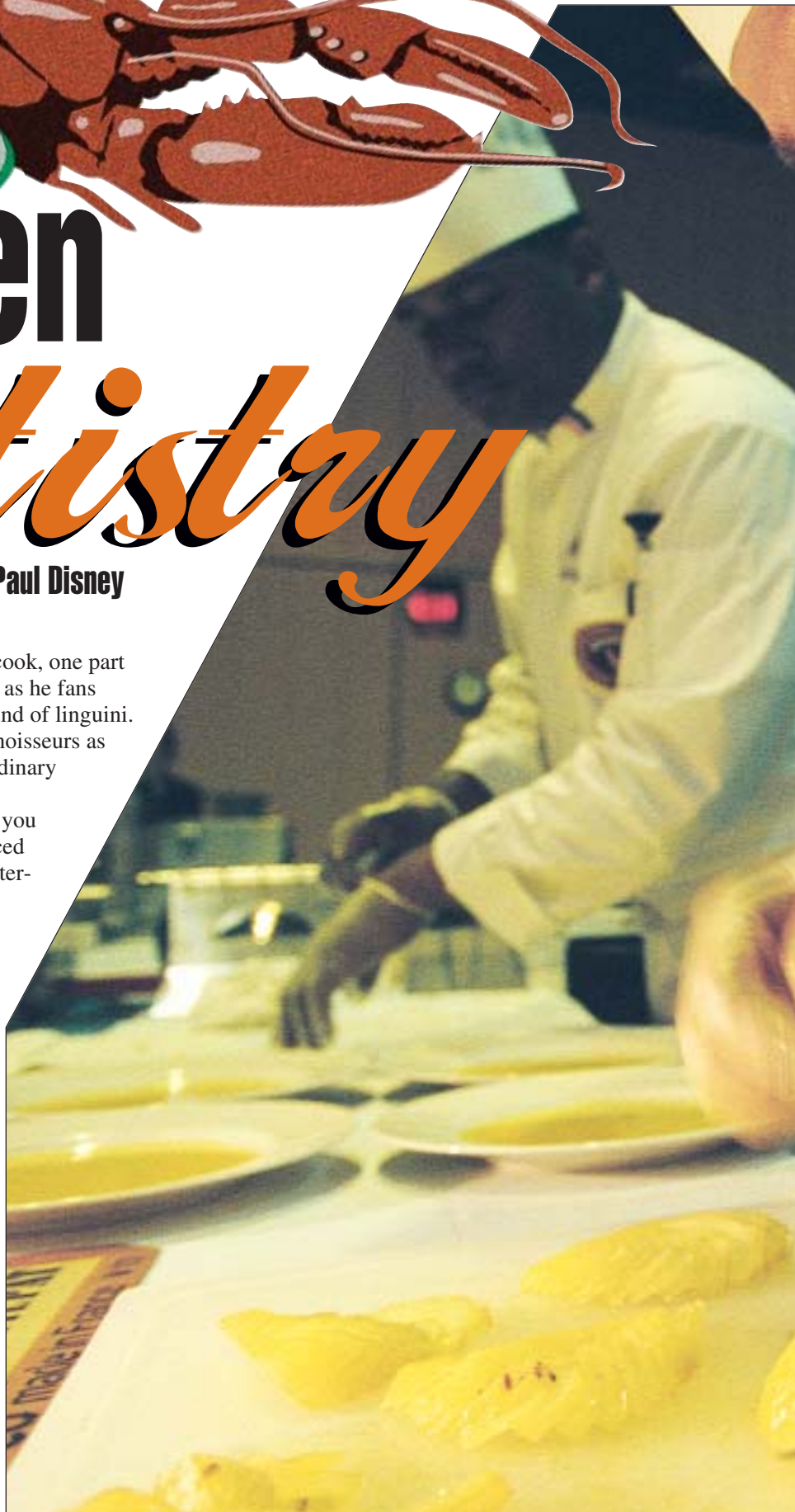
"If food looks and tastes good, it makes you feel good," said SSG René Marquis, advanced culinary skills instructor for the Army Quartermaster School, Army Center of Excellence, Subsistence, at Fort Lee, Va.

Food service specialists cater to patrons' likes and dislikes at more than 330 active-duty dining facilities worldwide. Though crowds can number up to 1,000 soldiers per meal, cooks dish out what Marquis said is the Army's biggest morale booster: good food.

The talent demonstrated in Army kitchens goes well beyond window-dressing or following recipes, according to CW2 Travis Smith, chief of ACES' Craft Skills Training Branch.



Special desserts — like the one being prepared here by SPC David Marecelli — often bring out the artist in Army chefs.







Though not every Army meal includes cakes as fancy as this one, being able to create such a wonderful confection is all part of the job for Army food service specialists.

“Preparing a good meal isn’t about dressing up food with pretty flowers cut out of vegetables. It’s about pairing compatible colors, shapes and sizes, and blending technique with intuition,” said Smith, who led the U.S. Army Culinary Art Team to a world championship in the 2000 International Culinary Olympics in Erfurt, Germany.

Simple touches can do wonders to an otherwise dull recipe. Upgrading baked chicken with an herb stuffing and a dollop of cream sauce can alter a basic entrée, for example. So can knowing when to poach, roast, braise, sauté or grill.

The emphasis on enhancing traditional menus has led some soldiers to refer to dining facility meals as “the best in town,” said SFC Ben Tesoro, who teaches advanced culinary skills to cooks

assigned to the 10 dining facilities at Fort Lewis, Wash.

Pepping up a dish can be easy, Tesoro said, and gave as an example “melon madness,” a dessert entered in the 2001 Culinary Art Competition.

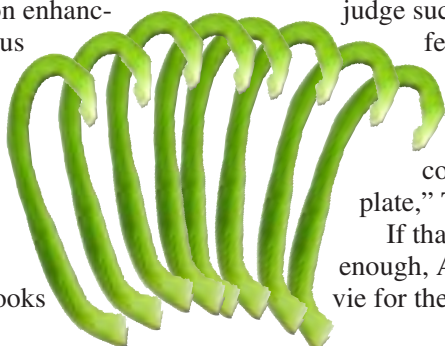
“This dessert is nothing but a mousse,” he said, “yet by adding a few enhancements — like a chocolate motif — we bumped it up a few notches.”

Tesoro encourages his cooks to let their imaginations influence the planning of daily meals. Not only do they occasionally serve fancy desserts with chocolate sauces and fruity dusting powders, they also learn to

judge success without verbal feedback.

“The smiles on patrons’ faces tells it all, but the biggest compliment is an empty plate,” Tesoro said.

If that’s not reward enough, Army cooks can also vie for the chef of the year title



in the Annual Culinary Art Competition. And the Phillip A. Connelly Program gives Army-wide facilities the chance to attain best-facility honors.

No Piece of Cake

The Army dishes out bonuses up to \$16,000 to attract food-service specialists into four-year service commitments. “A cook’s world is not easy. They’re in the kitchen at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning,” said LTC Donald Vtipil, ACES director.

Is the dawn-to-dusk job worth the bonus? “You bet,” Haupt said. “If you take somebody from the regular Army and put them in the dining facility for about two months, they’ll be praying to go back to their own unit. We work hard every single day, without much of a break.”

Little goes unnoticed in a job that promises a hungry crowd three times a day. While customers expect quality, Vtipil expects food-service specialists to welcome patrons into their facilities with good smells and smiles alike.

“It’s a matter of making eye contact with people coming through the line, smiling and saying, ‘I hope



Special occasions give chefs the chance to show off their more artistic creations — like this marzipan wizard.

Some managers rev up lunch with fajita stations or pizza and sandwich bars.

you enjoy your meal. We'll see you again next time," he said. "Cooks have the power to turn someone's bad day into a good day through attitude alone."

Vtipil knows that soldiers occasionally slip off post for a change from the dining facility atmosphere.

"But are we threatened by McDonalds? No," he said. "It's easy to attract soldiers who live in the barracks. But we're bringing in people who have transportation and who don't have to eat at the dining facility ... that's how we know we're doing something good."

Change

The image of Army dining facilities has improved since the advent of the Subsistence Prime Vendor Program six years ago. Since then, patrons have enjoyed the same brand-name items they're used to eating at home, like bottled Heinz catsup instead of the generic version once served in metal bowls at salad-bar stations.

"Cooks have even begun trying out recipes listed on the packaging. That means we're not stuck with the same french fry everywhere we go," Vtipil said. "We can expect variety — a little more spice or a slightly different flavor."

The Prime Vendor Program allows facility managers to order food direct from vendors and receive delivery within 48 hours.

But what if patrons don't want the day's roasted chicken or baked fish? Depending on the location of the

facility, food choices have grown from one or two entrées to five or six per meal. Some managers rev up lunch with fajita stations or pizza and sandwich bars.

Army Food Adviser CW5 Peter Motrynczuk said managers' flexibility and creativity is directly related to the number of soldiers who eat in their facilities. "The more soldiers who eat there, the more money managers are allowed to spend and the more options they have for buying," he said.

Overseas dining facilities have among the greatest patronage, since off-post options are often limited. The additional funds these facilities receive through good turnout enable them to treat patrons to a taste of local fare. Soldiers in Germany can occasionally try rabbit, for example, while dining facilities in Hawaii

sometimes serve poi, a paste made by pounding cooked taro root.

"Depending on where soldiers are from or what they ate growing up, we give them a taste of things they've never had before," said SSG Amanda Jolley of the Hunter Army Airfield Dining Facility in Savannah, Ga. "I think that helps make soldiers well-rounded individuals. We broaden their experiences."

Patrons at Jolley's facility sometimes get fooled into liking a dish they once avoided. And no matter what's on the menu, most still request time-honored favorites, especially Italian cuisine.

"The lasagna goes so fast I can't keep it in the pan," she said. "They keep coming back for more." □



Among the many skills soldier-chefs learn are dozens of ways to quickly and efficiently chop different kinds of foods. The key is holding the knife properly, which produces the perfect cut and protects the fingers.